

Leicestershire Adult Eating Disorders Service

Health problems resulting from eating disorders

LOW BODY WEIGHT

This leaflet provides information for patients about some of the physical problems that may result from maintaining a low body weight.

The aim of this leaflet is to provide you with information that is important to you, not to worry you or upset you. The information contained in this leaflet may raise questions to discuss with your doctor or therapist. It will help explain why you may need certain blood tests or other investigations.

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Low body weight

People with eating disorders may reduce their body weight to well below the healthy normal range, or well below the range that was normal for them.

We use a measure called the Body Mass Index (BMI) which takes your height into account. The calculation we use is:

The weight in kilograms
(The height in metres) squared

If the BMI is lower than it should be, then the body enters a state of semi-starvation, and there are a number of health problems associated with this.

Health problems resulting from low body weight

- Low body weight may lead to the body trying to conserve as much energy as possible. It may slow the heart rate and lower the blood pressure, and direct blood away from the peripheries of the body. The patient may notice a slowing of the heart rate, dizziness on standing, and cold/ blue fingers and toes.
- We may advise that the patient have their heart rate and blood pressure checked. We may advise an ECG to look more closely at the heart rhythm. This is because the heart can become stretched and thin and the rhythm can be affected. If you are at a very low weight this can lead to cardiac arrest.
- The body cannot keep itself as warm as usual, and so the patient may feel the cold more than others. The body may develop a fine covering of hair to keep warm.

- The normal sex hormones stop being produced and this can result in menstrual disturbances such as irregular or absent periods. A leaflet about menstrual disturbances is available.
- In children and adolescents, puberty may be delayed and growth may be stunted. Men may suffer impotence.
- Low body weight and the absence of menstrual periods can lead to thinning of the bones (osteoporosis). A leaflet about this is available.
- Inadequate food intake affects the stomach and bowels. The small amount of food and fluid passing through the body may result in constipation. The stomach may shrink, so even small quantities of food may leave one feeling bloated and uncomfortable.
- The skin and hair may become dry, and nails brittle.
- Some people with low body weight develop oedema (fluid retention) usually in the ankles. The excess fluid may falsely increase the weight.

Getting better

- Most of these problems will resolve with adequate food intake and weight gain. Nutritional supplements and vitamins may help along the way, but are not a safe alternative to weight gain and a good diet

If you have any questions or concerns about the information in this leaflet you can raise these with your doctor or therapist or leave a message with our secretaries on 0116 225 2557.